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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

THE NEW CRITICISM¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

FOR the few in our country who care deeply for criticism as a function of unequaled privileges and responsibilities, there is new encouragement in the contemporary scene. American criticism has always been defective in a fundamental quality: it has been unable to combine, in any organic relationship, an uninhibited aesthetic sensibility with a liberal and imaginative intuition of human life. Leaving out of account, naturally, that vast and sodden and oppressive underworld of perfunctory and mechanical "criticism" which was the despair of Henry James even a generation ago, it must be depressingly clear, to anyone who cherishes a reverential conception of this art that is anybody's doxy, that in its best estate among us it has exhibited either sensibility without reality, or reality without sensibility. When, briefly and fugitively, it has contrived to be aware of distinction and in love with some rarely detected beauty, its sense of human relations has been in some sort defective: weak, or strabismic, or intolerant, or blandly traditional. Again and again, in our better kind of critical meditation, we have seen a delicate and even vivid consciousness of excellence limited and betrayed by social myopia, by a smug or bigoted attitude toward human fact. We have seen the best of our criticism in the past, adequately discriminating upon its own levels of sympathy and perception, left barren and ungratifying because—as Miss Edith Wyatt says of the fiction of a great but sequestered American novelist—it was "untouched by any of the moods of a profound general consciousness." But it is a hard decision to have to say whether one's preference is

¹ *Great Companions*, by Edith Wyatt. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1917.

not, perhaps, for such critical observers as these, with their cloistered fineness and narrowness, rather than for that other type of our aesthetic appraiser whose lively consciousness of the veritable world beneath his window is unsupported by a right instinct for those things that count most permanently for illumination and delight. The thin, still air of the cloister, or the rude evangelism of the critical pulpit?—that has long been, in rough distinction, our choice.

Well, there is now, as we have intimated, a different condition, a wider and fairer outlook. We think that criticism as an aesthetically responsive and humanly sensitive art is being practised in America today with a heedfulness and a sense of responsibility unexampled in our intellectual history. And it is a remarkable fact (as significant a one as you please) that the most delicately scrupulous, the most intellectually and spiritually responsible, and the most technically skillful of this criticism is being written by women. We should frankly abandon any attempt to name a body of men now writing criticism in this country who could match, in understanding and vision, in sobriety and wisdom, in communicative power, the habitual performances of Edith Wyatt, Margaret Sherwood, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Helen McAfee, Ruth Shepard Phelps, and a dozen others whom it is heartening even to name over to oneself.

“ ‘Honest and intelligent criticism’—you read the words with a certain pain: and realize how very little America desires any such manifestation.” So writes Miss Edith Wyatt in a moment of dismayed recognition; and it is of Miss Wyatt’s own criticism that we would particularly speak, as one of the forces that are working to enlarge the restricted desire that she laments. To give a better than is wanted—that is, indeed, to throw dice, at times, with all the devils of bitterness and dejection; but such luxury of despondency is far from the habitual temper of Miss Wyatt’s poised and ripened spirit. She knows, of course, that so unpalatable and undemanded a thing as “honest and intelligent criticism” must constantly remind itself, as Wordsworth reminded every author of original power, that it faces the task of creating the taste by which it is to be enjoyed. And when, as with Miss Wyatt, there is the exhibition of a critical faculty not only honest and intelligent: able not only “to know a force in letters for what it is, to feel its power, and be conscious of its weakness, to be able to

laugh at its faults without contempt, to understand creative expression and live with it as with any other human value": but also, as she says with tender admiration of De Foe, able to actualize "a deep realization of the struggles, baseness, and injustices of the world"—when, we say, a writer thus oriented and equipped challenges the "enormous prestige of buncombe" in our literary criticism, the reality of the victory is not to be gauged by the small number of dead upon the field. There are victories in which the defeated are eternally unaware that the battle has gone against them.

We have spoken of a new encouragement in the contemporary scene for those to whom criticism persistently seems to be, as William Sharp so modestly claimed, "one of the several ways of literature." We can think of no American critic who more richly nourishes that encouragement than does Miss Wyatt. One realizes, of course, that those for whom criticism is merely aesthetic diagnosis immaculately performed in a vacuum will find her distractingly and inexplicably occupied with seeking (in Wordsworth's phrase) to "co-operate with the benign tendencies in human nature and society;" while those for whom criticism is chiefly an engine for the enforcement of moral issues will be slightly scandalized by her unconcealed infatuation for beauty. The platform manner, the pulpit manner, is a familiar thing in American criticism—a familiar and dreadful thing, a thing horribly and disastrously bound up with our incurable habit of discussing aesthetic phenomena in terms of a gross and sentimental piety. Miss Wyatt would bring distress beyond measure into the strongholds of this kind of criticism. Her deep and right intuition of human life, her pity and her magnanimity and her sensitive understanding, her unslaked and inappeasable appetite for justice: these traits would necessarily seem anomalous to practitioners of conventionally evangelistic criticism, because they would seem to be contaminated by an unmistakable enthusiasm for mere excellence, mere loveliness, mere intellectual distinction.

We fear it is indeed undeniable that Miss Wyatt is shamelessly prone to talk of such things as righteousness and justice and benignity in the same breath with which she utters a confession of perceived and treasured loveliness. She is continually and necessarily overtaking beauty, because she carries it with her, as Emerson said one must if one would find it. You will observe her, for example, regretfully dis-

cerning that in Henry James there is no relation of individual human facts "to any of the contemporary ideas rising from that silent spirit of collective masses which Renan tells us is the source of all great things." Yet she can turn from such large valuations as that to make memorable for us some exquisitely apprehended quality of form or spirit. Speaking of "the only sincere Internationalism which poetry can further," she tells us that to "this end, each one who has understood how to use the peculiar genius and faculty of his own tongue has done a service to the world": such, she says, was Stephen Phillips' service: "The mists, the sorrowing echoes of our speech, the cloudy passage of the sailing swan, the shadows of rippled waters, the mysterious reflections of eternity remembered and unascertainable, sang from the motion of his music. . ."

To perceive like that, to evoke like that, must seem, for many earnest souls, to imply errancy in a forbidden land. The realities of Social Justice are not usually stated in a language that is competent for poetic incantation.

It is with this constant bias toward sensitive and beautiful indication that Miss Wyatt discriminates the human and spiritual values of her subject-matter, whether it be De Foe or Henry James or Stephen Crane or Frank Norris, Henri Fabre or Walt Whitman, Thoreau or John Muir, Shelley or James Whitcomb Riley. That is her special and precious contribution. We are aware of no one else in America today who can interpret imaginative creation out of a fuller understanding of those things which are efficacious "in making men wiser, better, and happier": who can speak of them with equal insight, rectitude, and beauty. One may say of her with strict propriety and justice, as she says of the rewards of companionship with Thoreau and John Muir, that she widens the horizon, that she awakens the heart to realities that before had been too dully, too complacently, regarded: that she makes it easier for one to "think, in the enkindling beauty of the light of that sun which is but the shadow of love, about the fortunes of the captive and the purpose of the free."

LAWRENCE GILMAN.